

The Justice Files: Investigation lingers, but new theories emerge in pistol's past

 abc4.com/news/the-justice-files-investigation-lingers-but-new-theories-emerge-in-pistols-past

By Marcos Ortiz

August 1,
2019



DIRECTV subscribers! Don't go another day without access to ABC4 Utah. Take action and call 800-288-2020 to bring back your favorite station.

LEARN MORE

SALT LAKE CITY (ABC4 Utah) – Families of three women murdered called it a botched police investigation.

Even some members of the Salt Lake City Police Department knew Forrest Whittle was responsible for the murder of Lisa Strong. But was he involved in two other unsolved murders in the 1980s?

It took until 1996 before there was an arrest in the Lisa Strong murder. It came nearly ten years after she was gunned down in a Salt Lake City neighborhood.

"It was a classic cover-up and the only explanation for it is that they had so totally blown these cases," said Rocky Anderson who represented the families of the murdered women.

It all began in May 1985 with the brutal murder of Christine Gallegos in Salt Lake City. The following year, Carla Maxwell was shot to death while working at a convenience store in Layton. Then Strong was shot a month later. A ballistic test from shell casings found at each of the three scenes linked the cases. Police said the same gun, a .38 special was used to murder the women. But the weapon was never found.

A private investigation began in 1993 by Anderson after the families became frustrated with the lack of progress in solving the murders. His team of investigators relied on information gathered by three Salt Lake City police officers and a forensic specialist. The trio was fired after they ran a parallel investigation to that of the department's homicide unit.

Among the witnesses interviewed was Tina Schroyer who knew Whittle.

"(Whittle) said that he killed her," Schroyer told ABC4 News. "He totally killed her. He threatened to kill me. He was upstairs and kept calling my house over and over again saying that he was going to do me like he did (Lisa) Strong."

In 1986, she lived across the street where Strong was murdered.

Schroyer claimed Whittle often came to her home shared with her boyfriend Tim Robinson. She said Whittle and others often partied at her home.

On the night of Strong's murder, Schroyer said Whittle was at her home and went outside.

"Oh, I know Whittle did it," she said. "I know for a fact Whittle did it. I saw him run by (after the shooting)."

Anderson took on Salt Lake City police on behalf of the families of the murdered women.

"They had the information and apparently they didn't do anything with it but worse than that they represented to the public that they didn't have the information in the first place," Anderson said.

As an example, according to police records, patrol officer Frank Hatton-Ward told the homicide unit of a .38 special at a pawn shop possibly linked to Whittle and used in strong's murder.

Sgt. Don Bell who was over the homicide unit wrote a memo to his captain and said the "the gun was located. It was the wrong gun."

Hatton-Ward, along with Greg Chase and James Ilk had been conducting their own investigation shortly after the women were murdered. Police documents authored by Hatton-Ward claimed a young gang called "Varrios Chosen Few" were behind the murders. The trio supplied the homicide squad numerous transcripts of interviews with members of the gang. Members interviewed pointed fingers at others who were involved with the murders.

Sgt. Bell dismissed those interviews and in a memo to his captain called the statements "hearsay."

He also urged the captain that the trio was interfering with his squad's investigation and demanded something "official" be done. They were fired.

In a rare move, Anderson pushed for a grand jury. The secret panel determined there was evidence that Whittle murdered Strong and charged him with the crime.

But at trial, a detective from the homicide squad Jim Bell (no relation to Sgt. Bell) testified on behalf of the defense. His testimony was an attempt to show the shots fired came from a car- not from someone on the sidewalk. The state claimed Whittle walked up to Strong and shot her in the head and ran off.

Whittle maintained his innocence, but a jury found him guilty, and he was sentenced to five years to life in prison. He is still serving his sentence.

Leah Gallegos, Christine's mother watched with interest.

"I didn't know of him as a suspect," she said. "I didn't know of him. (But) was glad that he was in prison. They didn't have evidence to prosecute the case (Gallegos murder)."

Investigators knew the .38 special which was never found, was used in all three murders.

In an odd set of circumstances, Christine Gallegos' brother walked into the convenience store just before Carla Maxwell was murdered in 1986.

Steven Duran said he started to hang around his sister's circle of friends. He was 12-years old at the time and he said they befriended him.

At the time, he had no idea some of those friends belonged to the gang, Varrrios Chosen Few.

"We just happened to be at an apartment behind that 7-Eleven," Duran said.

He now suspects someone in that circle of friends returned to the 7-Eleven and shot Maxwell.

"It was probably someone that was near us," he said.

Schroyer said killing innocent people was an initiation of the gang.

A private investigator is now looking into the three-murders. Jason Jensen is trying to determine if the .38 special was passed around by members of the gang.

Jensen also discovered that Whittle was friends with Whittle and other members of the Varrrios Chosen Few.

"We believe she was some kind of escort," Jensen said.

In a police memo written by Hatton-Ward in 1988, he interviewed James Sherard at the Utah state prison. He was a member of the gang and was serving a life sentence for murdering a woman. Sherard knew Gallegos.

"She used to party with us all the time," Sherard told Hatton-Ward. "She was our whore."

Jensen said the Varrrios Chosen Few went by nicknames. He's learned that someone named "Tree" is linked to Gallegos' murder.

"We would like someone to tell us who 'Tree' was," Jensen said. "We believe that Tree may have been Christine Gallegos' shooter."

He believes "Tree" shot Gallegos while another person named "Squirrel" stabbed her. He claimed another person named "Shoe" witnessed the murder.

"Whether the gun was passed around from Forrest to another fellow named Tree or the like, we need someone to come forward and point that out for us," Jensen said.

The [Utah Cold Case Coalition](#) is offering a \$6,000 reward for any information that leads to a conviction.

Meanwhile, Christine Gallegos' mother still waits for justice. May 1985 is very much a part of her daily life.

"(It's) awful, I don't know how to describe it," she said. "It's taken away from my son. My grandkids. I am really lucky I didn't lose both of my kids."

Records showed Salt Lake police obtained Forrest Whittle's DNA to compare it with evidence from Gallegos and Maxwell. To date, there's still no word whether the homicide squad had the DNA tested or if it still exists.

Three officers who ran their own investigation, contrary to police protocol were fired.

But in the end they were right all along: a jury ruled that Forrest Whittle murdered Lisa Strong.

Note: ABC4 emailed the Salt Lake City Police Department multiple questions about the investigation. To date, they have yet to respond.

Copyright 2019 Nexstar Broadcasting, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.